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tucson **MEET OUR** *makers*

Next time you're in Tucson, be sure to make a pitstop at our newest hotel, The Eddy, which opened its doors on Feb. 23 in the Catalina Foothills neighborhood. The Tapestry by Hilton hotel's 106-rooms offer jaw-dropping mountain views, and their full-service lobby bar and restaurant Pin + Flour is not to be missed. Click on the What's New button below to learn more.

While you're in town, also be sure to dine at Tumerico, the anchor restaurant of Wendy Garcia, the subject of this month's newsletter and a James Beard Award Semifinalist for Best Chef in the Southwest. Keep reading to get the dish (oh yes, we did) on Garcia.

What's New



Meet Chef Wendy Garcia

If Wendy Garcia had a language of love, it would be best expressed by feeding others.

Garcia, a James Beard semifinalist for Best Chef in the Southwest and owner of restaurants Tumerico and La Chaiteria in Tucson, says that cooking reminds her of family.

“It was my mom and dad’s way of saying I love you,” Garcia said. “Today, when my frequent customers tell me I’m working too long or hard, I tell them I

hope they enjoy the food, because I'm giving all of myself. Every plate of food I make is not just a plate. This is my life and my love, and I feel so much joy in sharing it with them."

And share she does. Since 2014, Garcia has been dishing up vegan entrees (with the option to add eggs or cheese) to her loyal customer base at her mainstay restaurant Tumerico, where you'll find an array of mouthwatering dishes made from Sonoran Desert plants like nopalitos (cactus) and cholla buds most often sourced locally and organically.

She's also mastered a variety of faux meat options – crafting popular dishes like Cuban tacos and carne con chile from young, malleable jackfruit. She enhances the complexity of each dish with rich spices that span the globe, including her restaurant's namesake turmeric and other favorites like chai.

"Tumerico is a fusion of flavors from several cultures, including where I'm from in Chihuahua, Mexico, as well as spices that are found in places like India," Garcia said. "I borrowed from several places."

That's the genius of Garcia. She's able to meld cultures and people seamlessly through the creativity she expresses in her cuisine. And though she's nearly a decade into owning her own restaurants, her atypical approach to innovating and preparing food continues to be the foremost source of joy in her life.



“I’ve worked in various restaurants since I was 17,” Garcia said. “My last job in a fine dining restaurant, I was on my way to my shift and I pulled over, called my boss and quit. I didn’t like being told what to do every day and not being able to change or improve upon it. That’s not me – not who I am. At Tumerico, our menu changes every day depending on the ingredients we have available, and I don’t write down recipes.”

In a business with a high burnout rate, Garcia continues to elude anemic restaurant trends with her staunchly loyal employee base. Many of the people who work at her businesses are women, she says, and some are refugees. Garcia takes great pride in teaching them how to make her salsitas, which she says add flavor and depth to dishes that she describes as otherwise “very simple,” though they taste anything but.

Her family members are also involved in her businesses. These days her younger brother runs the mainstay Tumerico as Garcia focuses her lens on La Chaiteria. On the day we spoke, Garcia’s mother, who was visiting from

Mexico, was also helping in the kitchen.

“My mother texted me at 6 a.m. this morning, “Where am I going today? Am I going to La Chaisteria or Tumerico? I’m in the kitchen making guacamole right now,” Garcia said, laughing.

According to Garcia, her most prominent influence in the kitchen, however, is her late father, who passed away when she was 16. She describes him as a “big meat eater,” who ran a small farm at her childhood home in Chihuahua. They had chickens and pigs, and grew vegetables, so everything was made fresh daily. As the oldest sibling, Garcia was expected to assist her father in the kitchen, something she describes as disliking at the time because he was “always ordering” her around. Even then, however, she remembers seeing the intricate production of food “as an art and a craft.”

In hindsight, these memories of cooking with her father serve as the foundation for her now thriving business.

“When I started out on my own, I had recently quit my job and was broke,” Garcia said. “I thought to myself, I need to earn a living. But what do I know to do? Ah yes, I can make food.”



At that time, Garcia was a self-professed yogi and vegan who was enhancing the flavor of her food with a litany of spices.

She took her lifelong teachings and began selling her butternut squash tamales at a local farmers market, where on the first day, she made \$60.

“After that day, I knew I could do it,” Garcia said, who describes her pre-Tumerico self as painfully shy. “I just kept coming back and making a little more money each time.”

Today, Garcia has opened a second satellite Tumerico on Tucson’s historic Fourth Avenue with a limited menu and hours, as well as her newest venture La Chaiteria, featuring an array of meat-forward dishes.

“La Chaiteria is a little restaurant that I wanted for the Menlo Park community,” Garcia said of her newest concept. “I lived there when I moved to Tucson so I really love that neighborhood. We sell lots of traditional barbacoa and it gives me joy just to see people try the food and then tell their friends and family about

it.”

Moving forward, Garcia hopes to expand her restaurant concepts outside of Tucson, with a special focus on making the vegan dishes of Tumerico available to those who are searching for mouthwatering faux meat options but aren’t partial to tofu (like herself).

She also wants to ensure that the traditions she learned in the kitchen through cooking with her grandmother and aunts remain intact. She hopes to organize cooking classes featuring some of the women who have had the largest influence in her life.

As for the James Beard Best Chef in the Southwest semifinalist nomination, she says she’s still in disbelief that she was selected.

“I had no idea we were even being considered,” Garcia said. “An employee texted me that morning and asked me if I had heard the news. I was like ‘what news?’”

No matter the results, Garcia says she will continue to pour herself into her Tucson restaurants and the community she endears herself to.

“I love Tucson. It’s home for me,” Garcia said. “My journey here has been a long walk, but I’m a blessed person and I have the best employees. I am very happy.”

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